Numbers in academic writing

The rules for using numbers in academic writing vary among academic disciplines. The conventions described here are for NON-TECHNICAL academic prose where numbers are not a significant focus. Scientific and technical writing will have their own conventions and students should consult a manual dedicated to those standards. The main rules about the use of numbers in standard academic writing are about:

1. When to write numbers in words
2. How to avoid confusion with numbers in a sentence
3. When to use digits for numbers
4. How to write numbers correctly

> GRAMMAR CHECKERS will not help you with the acceptable presentation of numbers in academic writing. You need to know and use the conventions for writing numbers correctly when you are writing and proofreading your work.

1. When to write numbers in words

- **Write in words one or two-word numbers, rounded numbers and ordinal numbers**

For general academic writing, you need to write these numbers in words: all numbers under one hundred (e.g. ninety-nine) rounded numbers (e.g. four hundred, two thousand, six million) and ordinal numbers (e.g. third, twenty-fifth). *Exceptions: See 3. When to use digits for numbers*

Examples
- ✓ The country had been at war for twenty-five years. (number under 100)
- ✓ Over four hundred soldiers were sent to the war zone. (rounded numbers)
- ✓ The thirty-eighth battalion was sent to the war zone for the fourth time. (ordinal numbers)

- **Write in words numbers beginning a sentence**

Either write the number in words, or if that's awkward, then rewrite the sentence to avoid beginning the sentence with a numeral. *Exception: You can begin a sentence with a date.*

Examples
- ✗ ~~130 student volunteers~~ joined the university peace mission.
- ✓ One hundred and thirty student volunteers joined the university peace mission.
- ✗ ~~75 percent~~ of the rental properties were occupied by students.
- ✓ Students occupied 75 percent of the rental properties in the town. (rewrite)
- ✓ 2008 was a good year to commence university studies. (beginning with a date)

- **Write in words approximate numbers and some times of the day**

In non-technical academic writing, write in words the number for approximate figures (including fractions) and for full, half and quarter hour times.

Examples
- ✓ about half the students; a quarter of the university; four times as often; hundreds of times
- ✓ six o'clock, half past six, quarter past seven, quarter to nine, midday, midnight

2. How to avoid confusion with numbers in a sentence

- **Avoid confusion when using two numbers together (run-on numbers) or when dealing with several numbers in a single sentence**

Examples
- ✓ There were 32 third-grade students participating in the test. (run-on numbers)
- ✓ The computer laboratory has 24 thirty-centimetre monitors. (run-on numbers)
- ✓ At least 28 million people lived in the region where a 1500 dollar a year support allowance was given for each student's education fees. (Be consistent—write both numbers in digits or words)

3. When to use digits for numbers

- **Use digits for numbers greater than one hundred and in the following situations**

Use digits for	Examples
Numbers above 100	✓ Use digits (e.g. counted 3968 books on the shelves).
Money	✓ Use digits for exact amounts (e.g. $24.28), but use digits and words for rounded and large amounts (e.g. 98 dollars; $15 million).
Measurements	✓ Use digits with a measurement symbol (e.g. 32 ^{0}C *or* 32 degrees centigrade; 6 cm *or* 6 centimetres).
Percentages	✓ Use 55%, 55 percent or fifty-five percent (e.g. Over 55% of students passed the examination.).
Fractions & decimals	✓ **Fractions:** Write in digits or words. If you use words, join the fraction parts with a hyphen (e.g. ⅔ *or* two-thirds). ✓ **Decimals:** Give exact amounts in digits (e.g. 0.45 not .45; 2.36).
Surveys	✓ Write survey results in digit form (e.g. A survey of participants revealed that 4 out of 5 students worked.).
Scores	✓ Write scores in digit form (e.g. Students scored from 8 to 75 out of 100.).
Statistics	✓ Use digits to describe statistical information (e.g. The survey focused on 90 teachers, 10 principals and 24 auxiliary staff from 20 different schools.).
Eras (time spans)	✓ Choose from a variety of formats, but be consistent (e.g. the eighteenth century *or* the 18th century; from the 1960s to the 1990s; during the 2000s; in 2300 BC [before Christ]; in 1770 AD [*anno Domini,* after Christ]).
Dates	✓ Use this order (day/month/year) consistently (e.g. Tuesday 23 February 2008).
Time of day	✓ Choose from a variety of formats, but be consistent (e.g. 9 am *or* 9.00 am *or* 8.22 pm). IF you are NOT using 'am' or 'pm', THEN WRITE OUT THE TIME IN WORDS (e.g. the eight-thirty bus; four o'clock in the afternoon). For midday and midnight, write in words—do not use 12 am and 12 pm).
Spans of numbers	✓ Use digits (e.g. *pages*: 56–74, 115–117; *years:* 1864–1899, 1998–2008; *streets* 36–99 Spa St).
Divisions in a book	✓ Use digits to refer to divisions in books and plays (e.g. volume 5, chapter 6, page 45; act 2, scene 4).

4. How to write numbers correctly

- **Use particular conventions if you are required to write digits**

    a. Numbers 1–9999 do NOT use spaces or commas (e.g. 3333–no spaces for four digit numbers).
    b. Numbers 10 000–999 999 have a single space between the hundred and thousands (e.g. There were 287 701 participants in the survey.).
    c. Numbers from 1 000 000 have a single space between millions and thousands, and between thousands and hundreds (e.g. The population of this Australian city was 2 467 789 on the 3 December 2008.).

- **Use particular conventions if you are required to write numbers in words**

    a. Numbers greater than 999 that are written in words have a comma **after** the word thousand and **after** the word million (e.g. 3 206 411 = three **million,** two hundred and six **thousand,** four hundred and eleven).
    b. Two digit numbers and fractions use hyphens (e.g. 94 = ninety-four; ⅜ = three-eighths).